

OPERATOR INSIGHTS

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HEALTH PARTNERS

Hooked On A Feeling

Using Empathy to Create a Positive
Patient Experience

Merriam Webster Dictionary defines empathy as *“the action of understanding, being aware of, being sensitive to the feelings, thoughts, and experiences of others without explicit communication.”* Stated differently, empathy is the willingness to put oneself in another’s situation and imagine their physical and emotional needs. It is this sense of what is not communicated that makes empathy so critical to patient experience, and a leading reason why empathy is one of three pillars of Ensemble’s patient experience strategy. All health care professionals have the ability to dramatically change a patient’s experience, and potentially their outcome, by developing a sense of empathy and demonstrating it in each and every patient interaction.

The idea of working with empathy sounds simple, yet our challenge in health care is, while we visually see our patients arrive and often see them leave, we don’t really see them, much less acknowledge their individual situation. We have become stuck in a rut of complacency due to short staffing, inadequate training, decreased resources, and sometimes, even an overall lack of support to drive change. Failure to empathize erodes the human aspect of patient care and forfeits the opportunity to improve ourselves, our organizations and our patients.

How We Lose Empathy

Since no one purposefully sets out to disappoint another, it is critical to understand how failure to empathize can happen. In many situations, desensitization is the culprit. Spending every day in the same workplace blinds staff to oversights and inadequacies, such as worn waiting room furniture, poor directional signage, excessive wait times, etc., which are entirely apparent to patients and other guests. However, those working in the establishments—those in positions to effect remedies—overlook and fail to make improvements.

It is easy to understand how desensitization can extend to interactions with patients and coworkers. Spending each day fulfilling essentially the same role for each patient leads to a failure to recognize each patient as an individual. Before long, we simply fulfill our designated role for the patient quickly and efficiently, but sacrifice the ability to empathize and acknowledge each patient’s unique situation.

It is critical to discuss methods for improving our ability to empathize. There are practical and easy ways to help sensitize us to a patient’s experience. Before we talk about these steps to improve and learn empathy, it is important to understand the business and personal case for being empathetic in our work.

A Case for Empathy

Empathy has very real returns on investment. It is important to start with the consideration that when people feel understood, they are more likely to have a positive experience. Beyond this positive interaction, which is by no means trivial, following are additional documented benefits of empathy from a variety of studies:

- **Better communication**², which allows patients to feel more comfortable asking questions, and care givers notice when a point is not getting through.
- **Improved patient compliance**² whereby the patient follows the doctor’s advice and takes their medication according to plan, follows diet recommendations or executes lifestyle changes.
- **Better patient outcomes**² resulting in changes to patients’ health conditions or behaviors due to connections built through empathy.
- **Improved patient perception**² of the organization.
- **Increased patient satisfaction**² evidenced by satisfaction survey responses where patients recognize, understand and remember empathetic care.
- **Attraction and retention of better employees**² are a result of the organization’s positive reputation within the community; employees stay and higher-level candidates are attracted.
- **Organizational growth and higher earnings**² due to reduced turnover, patient loyalty and patient referral; if you build it, they will come.

Arguably the most compelling benefit, is the one enjoyed by the practitioner of empathy. Termed “compassion satisfaction,”⁴ those who demonstrate empathy often have higher levels of pleasure in the work being performed. In a 2019 study it was found that “empathy toward others and the ability to infer others’ thoughts and feelings... was characteristic of participants who experienced higher levels of compassion satisfaction.” Further evidence indicates providers with higher levels of empathy experience less stress, cynicism and burnout than those with less empathy.³ It is reasonable to interpret these findings as being applicable not just to providers, but to all health care employees. Those who work with empathy see a positive emotional experience themselves as a result of helping others in distress.

Gaining the Empathy Advantage

The natural question is “how does one gain an empathy advantage?” There are three practical steps:

First, make an organizational and a personal commitment to building the culture. Organizationally, communicate the importance of demonstrating empathy in every interaction. Be sure these standards are ingrained in every person in the organization and that employees are held accountable to upholding them. On a personal level, stop pretending not to see or hear things. Overlooking or ignoring what patients are saying or doing interferes with the level of care we have committed to provide. We must allow ourselves to acknowledge patients’ pain and problems and take immediate action to alleviate distress.

Second, assess the organization holistically. Don’t just ask staff if empathy is practiced, because studies show people regularly rate themselves higher than a patient would. A 360 approach is recommended:

- **Engage in journey mapping:** consider services and experiences from the viewpoint of the patient. This exercise is intended to provide first-hand perceptions and makes it easier to recognize what would make patients feel cared about in that moment.
- **Read all Patient Experience comments** with special focus on how the person felt about their experience. Do the comments have an angry tone, an appreciative tone, a frustrated tone? Patients are forming the reputation of the organization, so pay close attention in this exercise.
- **Act.** Plan interventions based on findings. An intervention is a combination of program elements or strategies to produce behavior changes or improve health status among individuals or an entire population. Interventions may include educational programs, new or stronger policies, improvements in the environment, or a health promotion campaign that engages and empowers healthy behaviors.

Lastly, building empathy must be part of the cultural tapestry. Creating an attitude of empathy cannot be left to a flavor-of-the-month initiative, or even a quarterly goal. Effectiveness depends on consistently acting with purpose and making empathy an ongoing dialogue.¹ For example, empathy should be a regular feature with:

- Rounding
- Huddles⁶
- Staff meetings
- Break room visual reminders
- Ongoing education
- Reflective exercises such as “Am I seeing this through the eyes of the patient?”¹
- Patient interviews (it is powerful to hear both empathy wins and fails directly from the patient)

Our Results: Developing and Using Empathy

Ensemble Health Partners is taking a leadership role in improving patient experience. In addition to mandatory *Introduction to Patient Experience* courses, where patient experience expectations are set, Ensemble Health Partners provides additional education to create a culture of empathy. One such course, *The R-Factor*, developed by Focus 3, focuses on a mindset process. Changing habits, including adding the habit of empathy, starts with honest personal evaluation of one’s mindset and mood and the effect those have on responding to situations.

The early results at Ensemble have been promising. As an organization, Ensemble improves patient experience through analysis, intervention, and education. Patient experience data for total department, section, and question scores (along with comments) provides a clear understanding of the organization’s reputation in the community. Using that data, specific interventions are designed and executed, followed with ongoing education. Webinars, facilitator-led instructions, newsletters, staff meetings and daily huddles provide regular opportunity to reinforce the patient experience strategy.

In one client example, the analysis of patient satisfaction surveys for the emergency department pointed to an uncomfortable waiting area, dissatisfaction with wait times and a misunderstanding of the triage process. We took action with the formation of an ED collaborative to implement interventions, and the results are impressive. The patient experience scores for the ED improved more than 15 points over a 5-month period, and similar interventions were suggested for other Ensemble clients.

When it Comes to Denials, Prevention is the Best Medicine

In an increasingly competitive health care landscape, patient experience is a key differentiator that can drive or derail success. As evidenced here, empathy is foundational to a positive patient experience and must be embraced by all levels of the health care organization. Doing so with focus and consistency produces measurable results for the organization, employees, and, of course, patients.



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¹ Elrod, J. and Fortenberry, J. (2018). *Am I seeing things through the eyes of the patients? An exercise in bolstering patient attentiveness and empathy.* BMC Health Services Research. (18)3. doi:10.1186/s12913-018-3681-x

² WEGO Health. (2017, November 14). *Empathy in healthcare.* Retrieved 6 January 2020 from www.wegohealth.com/2017/11/14/empathy-in-healthcare/

³ Gleichgerricht, E. and Decety, J. (2013). *Empathy in clinical practice: How individual dispositions, gender, and experience moderate empathic concern, burnout, and emotional distress in physicians.* PLoS ONE (8)4: e61526. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0061526

⁴ Haque, M. (2019). *Importance of empathy among medical doctors to ensure high-quality healthcare level.* Adv Human Biology, (9). 104-107

⁵ Tongue, J., Epps, H. and Forese, L. (2005). *Communication skills for patient-centered care.* Journal of Bone and Joint Surgery, (87)3. 652-658.

⁶ Jones, T. and Carpenter, J. (2017). *Evaluating the effectiveness of empathy huddles on HCAHPS Scores.* Retrieved 6 January 2020 from www.theberrylinstitute.org



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